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Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Task Force

Report of the Secretary-General

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Introduction

1. The present report has been prepared in response to the ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of the substantive session of 2000 of the Economic and Social Council[1] and Council resolution 2000/29 of 28 July 2000, in which the Council called for the creation of an information and communication technologies (ICT) task force on the basis of consultations with all stakeholders and Member States to be undertaken by the Secretary-General (annex, paras. 1 and 2).

2. In order to assist him in carrying out this mandate, the Secretary-General designated José María Figueres-Olsen, the former President of Costa Rica, as his Special Representative on ICT and established a Group of High-level Advisers on ICT, composed of representatives of Governments, the private sector, foundations, non-governmental organizations and the academic community, and chaired by Mr. Figueres-Olsen. Several teams, headed by members of the Advisory Group, conducted wide-ranging consultations during October-December 2000 with Governments and other relevant stakeholders, including the private sector, in all regions.

3. In addition, a note verbale was addressed to all Member States to elicit views and suggestions on the implementation of the Economic and Social Council resolution regarding ICT for development. A similar request was addressed to organizations of the United Nations system. Responses received were forwarded to the Advisory Group to be taken into account in developing the Advisory Group's proposals and recommendations.

4. At the end of January 2001, the Advisers adopted their report which was subsequently submitted in early February 2001 to the Secretary-General with a view to assisting him in formulating his recommendations to the Economic and Social Council on the establishment of an ICT Task Force. In their submission, the Advisers stressed that their report should be seen as the first step in an evolving process of collective thinking which the Task Force itself will need to further develop and refine as a basis for its actions.

5. The outcomes of consultations testify to the fact that there is wide agreement that ICT can be a potent instrument for accelerating broad-based growth and sustainable development and for reducing poverty. ICT are creating a new context for development, thereby offering both a unique opportunity and an urgent requirement for an unprecedented new initiative.

6. However, there is concern that at present the huge potential that the ICT revolution provides for development is not yet adequately reflected in development policies, programmes and projects. There are many initiatives and activities at all levels and in all regions of the world attempting to address this challenge. This diversity of efforts is essential, because there are no universal solutions to different regional, national and local conditions and needs. At the same time, the development impact of these initiatives and projects could be significantly enhanced through strengthening synergies, ensuring complementarities, promoting awareness, and supporting, replicating and scaling up successful practices.

7. The major conclusion to be drawn from the consultations is that the initiative to establish an ICT Task Force was considered very timely and enjoyed broad support, inter alia, by the private sector. It was repeatedly stressed by stakeholders that an endeavour of this magnitude and importance, predicated on genuine partnership of diverse stakeholders from both developed and developing countries, needed to be spearheaded by an "honest broker" and that in this regard the United Nations role, in particular the role of the Secretary-General, was indispensable.

8. For this endeavour to be sustainable and effective, support and participation of the private sector are imperative. A "win-win" situation must be created where boosting development and expanding markets are complementary and mutually reinforcing. The private sector can play a key role by developing the business models and technology innovations through which poor people can be reached for wealth creation.

9. The United Nations, with its moral authority and its universal and representative character, is uniquely positioned to shape a vision for ICT as an enabling factor in the building of a poverty-free world. Under the leadership of the Secretary-General, the United Nations can lend a truly global dimension to efforts to bridge the global digital divide, foster digital opportunity and thus firmly put ICT in the service of development for all. For the Organization to perform this role, the proposed Task Force should bring together all stakeholders in strategic partnership based on genuine commonality of interests and shared goals

focusing on synergies rather than on coordination. It should add value, for all stakeholders, to other existing initiatives and activities of a similar nature. It should adequately reflect their diverse needs and perspectives. It is with these considerations in mind that this report sets forth proposals for a broad strategic framework for the Task Force's role in spearheading the ICT-for-development effort on a global scale.

I. Role of the ICT Task Force

10. The Group of High-level Advisers on ICT identified a number of key elements of the role that the Task Force should play in harnessing ICT for development. These are summarized below.

11. New information and communication technologies are creating a New Economy and a new global information society. The challenge before us is to enable the currently excluded 4 billion of the world's population to participate in and benefit from the information revolution. ICT is not an end in itself but a means to an end. The Task Force should aim to harness ICT to bridge the social and economic gaps that divide the world — not as a substitute for broad development efforts, but to complement them as a leveraging factor that can empower the poor with the knowledge and skills they need in order to grow out of poverty. The Task Force should serve as a strategic instrument for developing bold, new and innovative approaches and for thinking "outside the box" to devise technological solutions that can help poor countries and people to leapfrog traditional technologies and stages of development. It should seek, embrace and encourage best practice and programmes. It should help bridge the "generation gap" by using children, boys and girls alike, as a "leading edge" and an accelerator for development. It should help develop balanced approaches that can address issues of promoting access, development of skills, and of local content, and the desire and capacity to use ICT for development.

12. The urgency of the task is particularly acute owing to the fact that business models and the regulatory environment have not been fully established so far. There is therefore a unique window of opportunity to lay the groundwork broadly for the development of models that are inclusive and encompass the needs of the poor.

13. Raising awareness, mobilizing commitment by political leaders at the highest level and helping create conducive and independent regulatory frameworks and institutions, developing norms and guidelines based on available experience and knowledge and creating the broad conditions for affordable access, and developing local applications, content and entrepreneurship should be key goals of the Task Force. The Task Force should also serve as an interface to bridge the gap between the ICT and development communities. It should help develop instruments to integrate ICT into development cooperation policies and practice so that official development assistance (ODA) can be leveraged in new and innovative ways.

14. The Task Force should set bold targets and goals with specified time frames and carry out stakeholder campaigns to mobilize Governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, academic and local communities and businesses to achieve these goals. Bringing the best available talent to bear on these efforts, the Task Force should, while striving for longer-term goals, also aim at short-term wins to show tangible and visible results.

15. The Task Force, by virtue of being established under the authority of the Secretary-General and of representing all relevant stakeholders, should be well placed to issue a unifying call for urgent action, to build strategic partnerships and to bring about the awareness and coherence essential to both current and future efforts without, at the same time, compromising the benefits of diversity of initiatives and activities. The Task Force is not intended to take over or supersede other important processes in this area. In fact, one of the basic principles of its operation must be achieving synergy with other activities that share similar objectives, in particular the Digital Opportunities Task Force (*dot force*) initiative launched by the Group of Eight countries (G-8).

16. To achieve tangible and sustainable results, action in the area of ICT for development needs to be local, cooperation should be promoted at the subregional and regional levels, but the broad agenda should be set globally. The United Nations, through the ICT Task Force, should contribute to this effort at a qualitatively new level which should reflect the Organization's unique strengths — legitimacy, universality, experience and presence on the ground as well as its convening and catalytic role which can help set global priorities and leverage and add value to existing and new

initiatives at the local, national, regional and global levels.

17. The Task Force is not envisaged as an operational or executing agency. For the execution of programmes and projects that it should wish to promote and support, it will need to identify appropriate entities and facilitate connections among interested parties.

II. Overall objectives

18. At the Millennium Summit of the United Nations held in September 2000, leaders of the world set the goal of reducing the proportion of people living in poverty by half by 2015.[2] This goal can be achieved only if growth is accelerated substantially and poor people are empowered to participate in its benefits, not as objects but as part of the solution. The Task Force can help achieve this goal by contributing to the efforts to harness the full potential of ICT for development and poverty reduction. The overall aim of the Task Force should be to spearhead efforts to integrate ICT in development plans, programmes and projects and promote ICT development and ICT applications in all sectors of the economy. Developing countries, in particular African countries and other least developed countries, should be the major focus of the effort.

III. A general strategic framework for the ICT Task Force

19. Keeping in view the poverty reduction goal of the Millennium Summit and drawing upon the key elements of its role as outlined above, the Task Force should advise the Secretary-General on the overall strategy for integrating ICT in development activities. It should develop a decentralized approach to cooperation on the basis of identification of problems and gaps in existing activities related to ICT for development which may benefit from reflection and discussion at a more global level. This approach should include development of national, regional and subregional Task Force mechanisms to support the work of the global Task Force. While more detailed arrangements are to be finalized in the course of developing a programme of action (see paras. 22 and 25 below, under "Modalities"), the following key elements that should be built upon are outlined below.

20. Areas of priority of the Task Force's activities should be those established by the aforementioned ministerial declaration of the high-level segment. Within this context, particular emphasis should be placed on:

(a) Raising awareness and understanding among policy makers on the potential of ICT for development as a prerequisite of the emergence of strong political leadership and commitment of Governments in this area;

(b) Promoting universal and affordable access to ICT, particularly bringing ICT to the poorest men and women for improved income, health, education and information, and to this end, emphasizing breakthroughs to achieve rapid results using new models and leveraging innovations;

(c) Assisting Member States in creation of national ICT strategies, policy frameworks, and regulatory environment, including appropriate independent regulatory frameworks for telecommunications, conducive to investment, infrastructure development, fostering of a competitive environment, local entrepreneurship and poverty reduction by facilitating self-employment by poor people, particularly poor women, and promoting small and medium-sized enterprises and wealth and job creation for poor people;

(d) Human resources development and institutional capacity-building, including e-government and education and training, promotion of programmes such as community-based technology training, and online training and education with a focus on young girls and boys; and promoting a balance between economic and social goals or "digital equity";

(e) Promoting coherence and synergy of the existing initiatives and activities at all levels by:

(i) Developing a cooperative research and communications agenda to identify problems and gaps, particularly in areas such as how to seed a market for small vendors and consumers to develop, promoting digital literacy and promoting the participation of the private sector and civil society in the application of ICT for development;

(ii) Sharing information on priorities, strategies and activities;

(iii) Establishing close links with regional and national initiatives to leverage their experience, avoid duplication and promote replication of successful practices;

(f) building partnerships, networks and consortia for actions among relevant stakeholders, including the private sector, at global, regional and national levels; and facilitating the sharing of relevant experience of both developed and developing countries and lessons learned in:

(i) ICT for development programmes;

(ii) The development of human resources;

(iii) The development of local applications and content;

(iv) The experiences in e-government;

(v) Preserving and disseminating traditional knowledge;

(vi) Promoting South-South cooperation;

(g) Identifying and mobilizing new and additional resources, financial, technical and human, for promoting and funding ICT-for-development programmes and projects, with particular attention to:

(i) Replication and scaling up of successful projects and programmes and practices;

(ii) Social venture capital models that are designed to provide private venture capital for seed money for socially responsible and sustainable development of markets;

(iii) Research and development (R&D) for new business models and technical innovations to expand access to poor people and to remote and rural areas, at lower costs;

(h) Promoting cooperation and coordination among United Nations bodies and helping to develop a broad strategy for the United Nations system on ICT for development, building on their strategies and activities and taking into account areas such as the mobilization of financial, technical and human resources as well as synergies with other initiatives;

(i) Promoting an open, inclusive and participatory approach to setting standards, regulatory frameworks and governance mechanisms for ICT-related activities, inter alia, in areas such as privacy, cyber-crime and commercial and financial transactions drawing on the work under way in a number of international bodies and industrial consortia aimed at developing solutions to regulatory issues;

(j) Providing global leadership for promoting a better balance between women and men in the ICT-for-development programmes and activities.

IV. Modalities

21. The modalities of operation of the Task Force should be simple, efficient, transparent and accountable. Agility, innovation and inclusion should be the key characteristics of its activities.

22. In order for the strategic elements outlined above to be implemented, it is essential that the Task Force formulate, with the participation of all stakeholders, a programme of action that contains a set of clear priorities with target dates and indicators of achievement. It should establish effective, transparent and participatory monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and procedures in the pursuit of its strategic objectives. However, it should be made clear that the Task Force is not intended to have any kind of regulatory authority over other organizations and initiatives, and thus that such indicators should not be binding but will only serve to measure the progress of the common effort.

23. As one of its first tasks, the Task Force should interact and cooperate with other activities in compiling a global inventory/compendium of relevant ICT-for-development programmes, projects and best practices, drawing from lessons learned about the projects currently under way and making this knowledge available to potential recipients and other interested stakeholders.

24. For the implementation of its strategy, the Task Force should be supported by a network of satellite nodes — regional, subregional and national mechanisms built, as much as possible, on the basis of existing programmes and activities. These sub-task forces would feed into the work of the global Task Force and its secretariat by contributing to research and lessons learned and serving as a source of the "global inventory". The work of the sub-task forces would start with mobilizing all actors at these levels to highlight and address locally identified as well as globally identified gaps in, and constraints on, policy and strategy.

25. The Task Force shall review its programme of action, as required, on the basis of results achieved and introduce necessary modifications.

V. Principles of composition and secretariat support

26. The Task Force's composition should reflect its qualitatively new character -- that of a multi-stakeholder effort with full and effective participation of all stakeholders, including the private sector. To ensure the necessary agility and innovation, the Task Force should have functional autonomy.

27. The Secretary-General shall appoint members of the Task Force following consultations with the regional groups and on the basis of the following criteria:

(a) The Task Force should comprise high policy level representatives of stakeholders;

(b) The Task Force's composition should be balanced, in terms of partner representation (public and private sectors, not-for-profit organizations, United Nations system) and geographical representation (developed countries, developing countries and countries with economies in transition);

(c) The Task Force should be an inclusive and participatory but also an effective body, as small as possible without compromising its representative character;

(d) The President of the Economic and Social Council shall be ex officio member of the Task Force.

28. In accordance with the above criteria and taking into account the composition of existing bodies such as the Executive Boards of the United Nations funds and programmes, it is proposed that the Task Force comprise 37 members as follows:

(a) Eighteen representatives of Member States;

(b) Eight representatives of the private sector;

(c) Four representatives of the non-profit sector, including academia and non-governmental organizations;

(d) Six representatives of United Nations system organizations;

(e) President of the Economic and Social Council (ex officio).

29. The Task Force may set up working-level arrangements and technical working/study groups, as required. The Task Force would elect its own Chairperson.

30. The Task Force should develop appropriate arrangements for eliciting the participation and inputs from all relevant stakeholders who may register their interest in participating in the process.

31. The Task Force will be supported by a small core secretariat with additional support on the basis of secondment from participating United Nations system agencies and other stakeholders. Regional, subregional and national Task Forces mechanisms will determine their own appropriate secretariat arrangements.

VI. Meetings and duration of the mandate

32. In view of the rapidly changing circumstances under which ICT operate, as well as to ensure that the Task Force remains relevant to the task at hand, the initial duration of the Task Force's mandate should be three years, its term commencing with its first substantive meeting to be held as soon as practical after its composition is completed.

33. A short working-level organizational meeting may be held to prepare for the first substantive meeting and to develop a programme of action, taking into account the work being undertaken in other forums, including the G-8 *dot force*.

34. In order to ensure high-level participation in its meetings, the Task Force would normally meet no more than twice a year for a period of two to three days. The meetings could be held at United Nations Headquarters or hosted by countries with regional rotation.

35. The Task Force shall submit an annual report to the Secretary-General which will focus on the major emerging issues, including recommendations thereon, in the context of ICT and development. The Secretary-General will report annually to the Economic and Social Council on the work of the Task Force. The functioning and composition of the Task Force will be reviewed by the Secretary-General, in consultation

with all stakeholders, before the completion of its initial term.

VII. Funding mechanisms

36. Financing of Task Force activities should not lead to diversion of resources from other development or poverty reduction efforts.

37. For the Task Force to be able to conduct its work, a core budget from voluntary contributions should be established under the authority of the Secretary-General, initially to support its functioning and its secretariat. In the context of the implementation of its programme of action, the Task Force would seek to mobilize funding for supporting programmes and projects, and might, in this context, consider the mobilization of additional resources for a trust fund and raise resources through other appropriate mechanisms.

VIII. Conclusion

38. Harnessing the potential of the ICT revolution for development for all, for reduction of poverty and for empowerment of those who are currently marginalized is a monumental challenge. At the same time, it is an extraordinary opportunity to make a tangible difference in the lives of the vast majority of the people on this planet.

39. Although ICT do not provide the magic wand in overcoming poverty and addressing development problems, they can make a major contribution in tackling many long-standing development challenges. The establishment of the ICT Task Force can be an important catalyst in this endeavour.

40. The speed of global technological and economic transformation demands substantive action on a global scale now. Changes that used to occur over a period of years now take place within months; changes that previously took months now occur within weeks. The challenge is not solely to bridge the existing global "digital divide", but to avert the prospect of its rapidly growing wider. The ICT Task Force, based on strong support and commitment from all partners, can make a tangible contribution to our quest for a better world for all.

Notes

[1] See A/55/3, chap. III, para. 17.

[2] See General Assembly resolution 55/2, para. 19.